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A strictly literary study of drama can be misleading, but plays brought alive through dramatic activities and productions may be the most profitable core of the secondary-school humanities program. The practical study of drama requires the student's active imagination, self-discipline, creative and positive responses to situations, improvisation, and script-interpretation. Although this emphasis upon personal interpretation may prevent drama from fitting neatly into the traditional definition of English as "an intellectual discipline whose end is literacy and the intelligent acquisition of certain appreciative skills," dramatic activities can be of great value in helping a child develop his personality and come to terms with reality. Beginning with unscripted improvisation, students can progress to productions of Brecht, Ibsen, Shakespeare, or Chekhov. While teachers should be careful not to let stage business interfere with the artistic unity of a production, theatrical experience can help students understand as fully as possible what the dramatist says and the means by which he says it. (LH)

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Opinion

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Editor

Miss Alison Dolling
23 Garden Avenue, Burnside
Telephone: 79-5053

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Why Teach Drama?

by David Bradley,

Associate Professor of English, Monash University.

Let me say at the outset that I have come to this conference, as I think most of us have, to learn. I am very conscious of the limitations of my own knowledge when it comes to the actual confrontation of the classroom; but I am also faintly conscious of having been billed as the "fall-man" of the discussions by being assigned the task of speaking about "the more traditional forms of drama as they have place in secondary school courses". Am I to accept a role as "a fuming old literary volcano of the right?" I would not wish to do so. I warmly applaud the developments in secondary drama teaching taking place here and in New South Wales (and rather faint-heartedly followed in Victoria), I have long been a devotee of the "rehearsal" method of studying a dramatic text that is associated with the name of Caldwell Cook of the Perse School in Cambridge, I firmly believe that the "literary" study of dramatic texts apart from theatrical practice of some kind is misleading and deadening, and I also believe that drama brought alive with all the resources that we are now beginning to explore and develop at Primary level — activity drama, improvisation — may well be the most profitable "core" of the "Humanities" subjects in the Junior forms of our Secondary schools.

But I am perhaps of the right in wanting us to be conscious of, and very clear about, our educational aims, particularly as teachers of English (as I assume most of us are) in making further claims for the general expansion of drama-teaching in secondary schools, and particularly at more senior levels . . . and I do not find a great deal of clarity in most of the literature of the subject I have been able to read. Nor do I find much enlightenment in the report of the proceeding of the U.N.E.S.C.O. seminar on **Drama in Education** held in Sydney just ten years ago, in which the secondary section is disappointingly brief.

That conference was, I think, dominated by two ideas: firstly the need to encourage a professional theatre in this country (and to see education as a means of providing an informed and critical audience; or more simply, of creating a **demand**) and following from that, the need to train actors, technicians and producers for amateur and professional theatre, radio T.V. and cinema, to meet that demand; and, secondly, a consciousness that much was happening in the U.S.A. and England (as an educational response to mass-media) in supplanting with a rather broader concept the traditional place of English as the subject most concerned with communication.

The second of those ideas is, of course, part of a world-wide problem. It has been estimated that in 1969 the average American will spend more time in socio-dramatic activities (mostly as a viewer or listener) than he does in sleeping or working. Similar things are said of the Australian schoolboy or girl, and educational systems everywhere are confronted willy-nilly with that fact. The sense of a need for greater appreciation of, and participation in, live theatre, as the most satisfying of the mass-media (most satisfying because it demands most participation) is also universal, but peculiarly poignant in Australia where our local theatres, actors, technicians and directors are fighting, not for survival, but to be allowed to come into effective existence against the overwhelming appeal of imported T.V.

Now the secondary section of the U.N.E.S.C.O. conference could not deal very adventurously with these ideas, firstly because it is obviously unfair and indeed impossible to lumber the secondary schools with the creation of a whole national theatre, nor can one even see one's way clearly to fostering, through enlightened teaching, and, in return, receiving the stimulus of, a live professional theatre that does not effectively exist. Some of our educational theorists have not done much better in response to the challenge of mass media when they proclaim, as a prominent Western Australian did some years ago — "we aim to encourage the arts of communication; namely, reading, listening and viewing". I leave that for the moment without comment.

Then again the U.N.E.S.C.O. discussion saw that English as the traditional "umbrella" discipline stands squarely in the way of a specialization in drama for practical reasons of time-tabling. Even now, though some broadening is permitted in N.S.W. and Victoria in the Junior forms, drama is not continued to Matriculation as a separate subject. In the Junior forms it nevertheless remains attractive for two reasons: the one as offering some positive response to the mass-media challenge, from imaginative participation all the way through to group-therapy; the other as chiming happily with modern theories of "child-centred" education.

Let me put it this way.

A colleague of mine when pressed about his view of the desirable ends of the educational process, said that he would like to see children "loving, responsive and creative". One cannot but applaud.

I would now like to read you a precis of Mr. Clive Sansom's remarks, also admirable for the most part, about the values of drama in education. They may be taken as a fairly accurate summary of the views of the majority of recent writers on the subject (and thus incidentally will help us a little further to clarify what we are talking about). He is writing of children in Primary School —

1. Helps child in dealing with outward reality — exploring, discovering, understanding with the senses, not only with the brain.
2. Self-confidence.
3. Balance — i.e. balancing intellectual development with imaginative and emotional development.
4. Concentration; ability to live completely and to live in the moment.
5. Escape from self-paradox of being most oneself when least aware of oneself (a basic need recognized by most religions).
6. Identification with others — not analysing and talking **about** other people, true understanding; knowing at a deeper level than the intellect.
   (This can be carried to inanimate things and might lead, he suggests, to less unnecessary destruction of trees.)
7. A means to the conquest of fear; puts fear inside a pattern and therefore controls it.
8. Learning right and wrong, which (for some unexplained reason) is reassuring about the ultimate triumph of right.
9. Getting it out of oneself . . . eradicating warlike and aggressive feelings.
10. Team work.
11. Self-discipline.
12. Working with a teacher in a free and friendly way.
13. Purposeful direct vigorous speech; sensitiveness to rhythm.
14. Training in observation; behaviour patterns, aural perception.

15. Training as an audience.
16. Appreciating literature. ("But appreciation so often means an intellectual knowledge. I would rather teach a love of literature.")

As a programme for primary school activity-drama that too is no doubt admirable.

When it is applied to secondary study, as it is, for example, by Katherine Anne Ommanney in her book **The Stage and the School** (1932) its soul-saving intention of the drama class is more obvious:

> No class encourages such obvious improvement as do the various phases of theatre study. Work in dramatics demands more self-control, ability to accept criticism, good sportsmanship, tact, and plain good nature than any school activity.

and A. F. Alington in **Drama and Education** (1961) makes the point more obvious than I could wish:

> Very few children will in fact become actors or painters, but most of them, by means of the practice of the arts, will be filled with riches and "have life more abundantly".

It must be admitted that Mr. Alington afterwards is impressed by the formidable thought of the young Shelley taking part in the evocative improvisation! Boys will be boys. Well, but "loving, responsive and creative" — what better means than the teaching of drama to this end? For it is universally assumed that the end result of group activity will be good and socially useful (always with a little help from the teacher, of course).

May I let Professor Monro, another colleague, writing in **Melbourne Studies in Education,** 1963, in an essay entitled "Pawns against the Devil", speak for me on the opposite side?

> In the enlightened twentieth-century it appears the child is no longer a mind to be trained. Instead he is a character to be moulded, a barbarian to be tamed (socialized), a foreign body to be assimilated, a personality to be adjusted. He is to be integrated, made aware of his cultural heritage, firmly grounded in the spiritual values of our way of life, guided into wholesome and worth-while social relationships. In short, he is to be got at.
>
> What one misses is any reference to the training of the mind, the acquisition of intellectual skills and the cultivation of intellectual and cultural interests.

Now it will be apparent that as far as the senior school is concerned, I am more inclined to agree with the latter comment than with the former. At least the practical study of drama involves active imagination, self- discipline and creative and positive response to situations and saves us from the passivity of being mere "readers, viewers and listeners", but how far does it or can it become an intellectual quest, and how far has it a definable aim when we come to consider it as a subject in itself? One result of placing dramatic creativity very high on our list of desirables is that play-scripts come to be treated merely as spring-boards for improvisation: much as if you were to sit down at the piano with a Bach Prelude open in front of you and improvise upon it in the manner of Chopin. That may be clever and satisfying; it is even occasionally done by competent musicians; it may please your hearers better than the original score; but it is not Bach. If you were to argue with your teacher that what finally matters is what you bring to Bach, what emerges from your contact with the score before you, you might expect him to reply "Very well, but, as a beginning, let us play the notes on the page as he wrote them."

In theatre, the tradition (at any rate in English-speaking countries) is all with the improviser and the actor, and thus there is some real confusion of aim in supposing that the practical study of drama is in all senses a support for the "literary" approach, if the literary approach involves understanding of the text.

This has also been true in the history of academic dramatic criticism (a fascinating study in itself). Dr. Johnson, for example, believed the last scenes of **Lear** too affecting to be played, for he had seen the play only with Cibber's ending; A. C. Bradley's imagination was wedded to the proscenium-arch stage, though he knew it to be misleading. Textual editors have been very slow in getting rid of those interpolated scenic descriptions ("Another part of the forest" and so forth) that are a positive hindrance to students of Elizabethan texts and do violence to Shakespeare's stagecraft. One could multiply instances forever, and I will return to a few.

How far then should drama remain closely tied with English and how far is it some separate activity? For "English", however much it draws upon our creative and responsive faculties is an intellectual discipline whose end is literacy and the intelligent acquisition of certain appreciative skills (call them critical if you like) in relation to a syllabus of set texts. Can drama, still a proper part of the English syllabus, be defined in some other way? My impression is that at this stage of schooling it cannot. The difference between the study of a play and let us say, a novel, is simply that a play is the one kind of literary work that is not complete on the printed page, and exists in print only as a musical score exists. And so, to be literate in drama, one needs more time, more instruction about how the script is brought to life, more experience in using one's imagination, more simple **knowledge** of what happens between an actor and the audience, of different modes of theatre, of historical styles and conventions of performance and so on. It will be of immense help if the student has been led towards this kind of understanding by unscripted improvisation, leading to scripted improvisation, but in tackling Shakespeare or Ibsen or Shaw it seems to me that he or she is entering on an intellectual quest where what is involved in understanding involves conceptualization and vicarious knowledge of a kind not always immediately related to experience. The experience of the best in past literature will be in a sense "beyond" him because it involves adult ways of looking at the world, adult ways of feeling and behaving, passions which violently extend his own range and which therefore must be coped with intellectually.

I am well aware that this point of view is out of fashion, and as a member of syllabus committees I spend part of each year agonizing over which plays of Shakespeare are indeed within the scope of students' immediate interests at various levels. That partly depends on the teacher.

It does not, of course, follow that we should therefore propose an artificial end to our education in English, but neither is it necessarily true that the too careful gearing of subject matter to be learned to the present interests and abilities of the student necessarily produces intellectual excellence or even intellectual interest.

I have laboured this point rather tediously because I want to try to become a little more practical and clearer about what sort of theatre activity should really be our aim at senior levels. I am assuming, of course, that for the practical training of actors and directors we are going to advance rapidly, both in drama schools and in University courses — preferably post-graduate courses, in my view, but that is another story. Clearly

we must produce high-calibre drama specialists who are competent in all departments of practical theatre (that in itself is a tall order) and they will be immediately set to work in improvisation classes and in directing full-scale school productions. I hope that a great many teachers of English will want to add practical theatre to their professional kit-bag.

But how much time will we want these specialists to devote to **theatre** training as such?

Time is, of course, the major problem. A secondary student can be expected to take part in perhaps two plays in the last two years of his schooling. Even at that rate he will have time only to learn his part, attend rehearsals and a few discussions, take some part (if he already has the skill) in the building and painting of the set, or in publicity or front-of-house or the like. He will not naturally be able to take much practical part in the more skilled departments — costume, lighting, music, stage-management — though he may get a sense of how these things are done and how they contribute to the total effect. He may, as well, take part in a number of play-readings if he has an enthusiastic teacher. But more than this there is simply not time for; and many even of the things he may be called on to do, will have little direct bearing on his education in drama. That is unimportant. In interpreting a complex play-script — a Brecht or Ibsen or Shakespeare — any sort of familiarity with the theatre is a help, and taking part, even as a prompter, in a one-act play will be a step forward, even though it will be no help at all in interpreting a complex series of scenes in Shakespeare or reconstructing the import of Ibsen's stage-directions. However, not everyone, not even every drama specialist, is gifted in making his aims in production clear enough to a cast to involve them in active and intelligent participation. We can only travel hopefully.

However valuable frequent performances and full productions are, I do not think they are our first aim from a teaching point of view, especially when we are dealing with extremely complex and demanding scripts in a short time. Productions (if they are good) create **confidence** in a play we are studying, but they often take us away from the script, and, blur the real significance and artistry of the dramatist's vision.

Sometimes one sees this clearly, as in the importation of some symbol into the staging which appears to give the action coherence. I have heard plans, made under the inspiration of Wilson Knight, for a production of **Macbeth** in which a huge sword was to be suspended in mid-air over the actors. The symbolic meanings (beginning with Damocles) were much enthused over, but it appeared to me to be merely distracting from the action of the script and probably productive of some rich comedy when Macbeth asked was it a dagger that he saw before him.

Or again, bits of business are sometimes added to explain an aspect of the text which is a mystery to the producer. You may have seen in Mr. Alden's production of **A Midsummer Night's Dream** two beetles (overlooked by Shakespeare), who accompanied Oberon everywhere, thus robbing his entrances of a great deal of dramatic force and many of his lines of meaning, all because Mr. Alden had misunderstood Titania's command

> **Hence, away, now all is well**
> **One, aloof, stand sentinel.**

To Mr. Alden these lines meant that a fairy was being commanded to parade superciliously on sentry-go holding a bulrush. Shakespeare in his careless way, had obviously forgotten his presence when he then brought in Oberon unchallenged to squeeze the juice of the western flower on the

sleeping Titania's eyelids. Solution: Oberon's beetles arrived with a vast sack into which they popped the fairy and carried him off kicking.

A small improvisation, but one that shows that Mr. Alden had never seriously considered Shakespeare's dramatic values or striven to reproduce them. That is, of course, typical of the confusion of even many of the very best productions of Shakespeare at the present time.

Perhaps I may be forgiven for taking another illustration of what I mean briefly from a recent production of my own with a group of University students — Marlowe's **The Jew of Malta.**

The Jew poses an interesting problem of understanding, principally in defining what sort of a play it is. It has been called a "tragic-farce" and might run a gamut of tone and feeling anywhere in between. It can be played fairly seriously: it can be burlesqued: interpretations might vary very widely. Though, as a producer, I usually try to decide or predict things of this kind at the beginning, when planning the production, and am inclined to impose that view on the cast (by persuasion, I hope, rather than force) here was a case where an initial period of improvisation was essential. Here one needed to let the actors mature in their roles, get the feel of the possible kinds of interpretation before deciding on the final lines of the production. But there simply wasn't time. Plans for lighting properties and decor, and therefore for positioning and movement, had to be made well in advance and I began to feel a sort of opposition — the cast were having an interpretation foisted on them before they were ready for it. However, there was so much business to be coped with (some of it very difficult, such as dropping the Jew from a high balcony into a cauldron etc.) that they soon became absorbed in that and began to develop the idea of the play from the business. The business indeed turned out to be successful and convincing theatre:

—the play opened with dicing between Pilia-Borza and a beggar and the savage murder of the beggar.

—the duel in which Mathias and Lodowick kill each other was a magnificent sequence and ended with a bit of treacherous stabbing which seemed perfectly in keeping with the opening.

—the death of the poisoned Nuns — slowly retching their way across the stage, struggling and failing to help one another — was so sick at rehearsals we could hardly go on with it, but horrifyingly funny in costume.

—a crucifixion-banner, painted Byzantine-wise, closed off entrances and sat (unlit) like a wall painting behind the scene of the poisoning of the prostitute and her followers, was carried as a religious symbol in processions and was spot-lit at the end. It produced endless symbolic meanings and complex ironies.

Now, as it happens, all of these theatrically successful elements (except the basic direction for a sword-fight) were imported into the script. I hope in this case they did not add too much to those meaningless lines and even meaningless characters we produce when we make Shakespeare a production exercise.

A glaring example of **that** is in **Much Ado About Nothing,** where producers (and I too have been guilty here) have a strong tendency to put in a dumb-show at Hero's window where Borachio woos her maid in disguise and is observed by the three gallants conducted there by Don John.

That whole scene is, of course, a gross improbability and Shakespeare has very wisely **left it out.** Indeed the whole reason for its elaborate and very confused description is that it **was not** played (and indeed **could not**

have been convincingly played on the Elizabethan stage). Moreover Conrad **has no other raison d'etre** in the play than to be the auditor of Barochio's account of the incident — an account which is quite unnecessary if the scene appears in dumb-show. Thus one merely creates a string of puzzles and obscurities by joining together what Shakespeare has deliberately put asunder.

In the case of **The Jew** our additions did seem to have point in the general pattern. But they were interpretive **additions of our making** and their very success made it the more difficult to see how Marlowe had gone about his business. The best one can hope is that they sent students back to the text with a stronger appreciation of the ironies that Marlowe achieves **in quite different ways.**

Yet in other ways we did discover things about the play that revealed to us more clearly **what it is** and helped our understanding. For example, commentators have wanted Barabas to display one aspect of Marlowe's universal theme: "the Machiavellian pursuit of power through infinite wealth." It occurred to me that to make this point clearer to a modern audience Machiavelli could be given a number of lines that really belong to other characters and could be turned into a kind of chorus; so that, by using a Medieval convention (one which Marlowe uses in other plays but which is quite improper in a production of **this** play where one ought to be conscious of its unmedieval method) we could make modern audiences more aware of the Machiavellian element in Marlowe's thinking. In doing so we unexpectedly made the discovery that the balance of the play is quite otherwise — viz: that Marlowe's real conception of Barabas the Jew is not as a Machiavel at all and that the Machiavellian elements in his speeches are "rung in" in a quite doctrinaire and unconvincing way. What impressed us about Barabas, minus his ten Machiavellian lines, was his lyrical appraisal of the concrete; his love of clutching, feeling, handling and making things and his positive embarrassment in situations of command. We became sensitized to lines that before seemed unimportant, such as: "Give us a peaceful rule, make Christian kings That thirst so much for principality."

And we found that these lines were the key to the comic situations for the audience.

Thus in some cases our theatrical experience was of interpretive value and conveyed something of real interest to the audience.

Another such situation remember, which was of great use to the actors in a cast and also I think to students, was in a production of Chekhov's **Uncle Vanya**. Checkhov, of all dramatists, is the most **theatrical** in the sense that one can only begin to understand his characters by acting out physically or imagining very sympathetically what they do. Even the clicking of knitting-needles, the scratch of a pen, a few notes struck on a guitar have an eloquence in Chekhov's dialogue which make them far more than mere "sound-effects".

What we wanted to bring out in this production was the isolation of the characters from each other, and, to this end, we carefully designed the furniture (and the movement around it) so that whenever any intimate movement took place there was always something in the way — a footstool, a bottle — whatever. And again by happy accident we discovered in a way a new way two things about Chekhov's characters:

> Their passion for self-disburdenment which is always frustrated by practical needs. (to cough, to laugh, to pull the trigger, to tidy the house.)

Their constant habit, which amounts both to a standard comic method and a kind of commentary on life, of saying one thing and doing the exact opposite.

These are not shattering revelations about Chekhov, but they can only be **understood** by being acted out; they cannot even be understood by being read or watched, for they are techniques built into extraordinarily subtle portrayals of comic characters to which we respond, as if to real people. I doubt, too, if they can be "understood" in this way by readers who have not already an acute acting sense — (this is partly what makes Chekhov's plays a constant temptation and a constant failure as set texts at Matriculation level.)

I think, however, that Chekhov could be a most valuable study, given teachers with sufficient theatre experience and students practised in improvisation. Certainly a few students find great pleasure in reading Chekhov for themselves. But he needs real theatrical imagination and some patience.

In all these cases I am asking not "Have we had a jolly good time experiencing togetherness in relation to a theatrical experience?" but "**Have we understood as fully as we possibly can what the dramatist was saying and the means by which he has said it? Have we entered as fully as possible into the experiences which he has designed for us?**" Those seem to me the central questions when faced with a play text in the classroom.

I hope it is clear that, though I believe those questions have to be answered by rehearsal-methods and even full productions, rehearsals and productions do not give us the whole answer, and may even create such confusion that our view of the dramatist's intention is totally distorted. I have tried to show that from an educational point of view the doctrine that "creative interpretation must be free and unhindered" is really a heresy. (I find personally that I cannot teach a play I've produced with any success for a year or two afterwards — my own imagination is still standing in the way of the dramatists, and I'm inclined to teach things that do not exist in the text.)

Our job is to understand, and it may not hurt if we are to some extent purists in this matter. A teacher with a wide knowledge of theatre as a practical art is going to be at an immense advantage in bringing all the issues clear and encouraging sensible exploration, but if he is an enthusiastic theatrical exhibitionist he is just as likely to get in the way.

Finally, a further example, to suggest that much can be done in reading a play sensitively to stimulate understanding of what should, but never does, happen in the theatre.

At the end of Ibsen's **Ghosts** there is a master-stroke of theatrical technique which depends on very carefully following Ibsen's stage-directions, even to the smallest detail of placing of the furniture. What **happens** is simply that Mrs. Alving turns out the lamp on the table near which Oswald is sitting. But in that action a score of thematic and practical issues are brought to a crisis and solved. Let me suggest just a few of them. Practically, the sun is seen rising over the glacier-peaks outside the window (directly behind the table) and the effect of morning is best felt in the darkened room. Oswald's mental collapse (which might be comic in full light) is veiled from the audience. From the point of view of character the automatic gesture reveals Helen Alving's conscious hopes and unconscious doubts as no words could, and one might speak for several minutes about that alone. From the point of view of plot we are reminded that everyone has been up all night at the burning Orphanage and that a long

chapter is now closed. Thematically, the circle of lamplight — the circle of confidence created in the previous act for the revelation of the Truth— is now dispensed with. It is indeed, this prompting, rather than the housewifely care of saving paraffin, that motivates Mrs. Alving's automatic response. We appear to have emerged into the light of day and knowledge. Only — at the same instant — Oswald, for whose sake the whole painful process has been undertaken, goes into the dark — literally into silhouette; metaphorically into the darkness of insanity.

Now I have never seen this happen in the theatre; either because for practical reasons the perch-lighting for the window can only be arranged stage-left and the table and lamp have got themselves stage-right, or because a clever producer has done better than Ibsen and re-arranged the set altogether, or because Oswald has complained of being upstaged in his most dramatic scene and has insisted on playing it on the sofa. But that lamp illuminates the intricate theatrical symbolism and Chinese-puzzle of Ibsen's stagecraft and the nature of the art of the Well-made Play as well as anything I know; and it illuminates, too, I hope, my contention that the fullest realization of the playscript is not always or necessarily to be found **in the theatre.**

But, naturally enough, the fullest realization can only be found through close attention to the nature of the theatre.

I have not discussed a whole series of benefits which come from the teaching of practical drama at an advanced level—

- the sensitivity to cadence and phrasing from projected speech, which may help (and I believe does) to encourage a feel for poetry.
- the clear sense of structure or artistic form that emerges from a performed play — or even a properly understood play and which enables one to understand more clearly the shape of other literary forms (the novel, the short story and some kinds of poetry),
- The sharp conflicts of ideas which encourage precise thought in living situations (and here a previous training in improvisation will be of immense help),
- the control of muscular movements in relation to a creative or expressive purpose (dancing, fencing, mime and even getting precisely from one place to another on stage) which can once again sensitize one to the rhythm and pointing of speech. This often comes as an astonishing revelation of pleasure to unliterary students,

for all of which and many more reasons I would put drama both at the threshold and centre of any course of literary study but I do not think any of these reasons justify changing our perspective too radically from the teaching of dramatic literature to the teaching of practical theatre.